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NEW HAVEN — The widespread leaking of classified defense information has become a far more serious problem than is commonly appreciated. The national-security establishment is large and contains many points of view, differences of opinion, and ideological feuds. As in almost any organization, these disagreements lead to bureaucratic and political infighting that takes on a life of its own.

The wholesale leaking by groups interested in pushing their own particular programs and goals has become endemic. In 1978, a Central Intelligence Agency analyst was forced to resign because he leaked a top-secret study of the SALT talks to a Senate committee. In his personal opinion, the arms-control negotiations were not in the United States' best interests and so he decided to provide damaging information to opponents of SALT. Last fall, a Congressman revealed detailed intelligence collected on Soviet strategic war games because in his opinion it demonstrated Moscow's violation of SALT agreements. The gathering of this information involved the most sensitive electronic intelligence-gathering devices that America possesses.

A new policy for targeting American strategic weapons has also turned up in the news media, as have the C.I.A.'s intelligence estimates of Soviet military capabilities. At one time, this information, of the highest national importance, was protected with all of the Government's resources. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan has collected media accounts of these intelligence estimates for insertion into the Congressional Record to illustrate the dimensions of the security-leaks problem.

The argument, "everybody does it," is routinely used to defend the leaking of classified information. Supposedly, "that's the way the game is played in Washington." This defense has little to do with the unintended consequences and organizational pathologies resulting from this practice.

Leaking Strength

By Paul Bracken
and Martin Shubik

Presidents have long engaged in leaking information — that is, in declassifying it — as in 1964 when Lyndon B. Johnson decided to reveal the existence of the SR-71 spy plane and other weapons. However, when many different groups opt for declassifying information, the effect is different from when a single White House source does it. Moreover, the value of leaked information is generally discounted on the assumption that material is being divulged selectively to make the sponsor of the leak look good. A form of information warfare develops, with an escalation in the number of leaks, and with foreign intelligence establishments learning a great deal about America's military capabilities.

Further, widespread leaking of national-security information destroys one of the main goals of arms control education of Soviet leaders. The educational value of arms-control discussions — they enable both sides to understand each other's strategies, lessen mutual suspicions, and minimize the chance of inadvertent provocations — has long been a major reason to enter into negotiations. However, for such education to be an effective tool of American security, it must be based on communications that are centralized, coordinated, and cautious. Unauthorized information leaks have none of these features and, worse, often conflict with one another. This makes it exceedingly difficult to expect any shared values in the event of an intense crisis — a situation that is

exceedingly dangerous given the sizes and delivery speeds of today's weapons.

Finally, leaks result in a decline in shared perceptions and encourage bureaucratic dissonance that saps the United States defense establishment's vitality and drives out some of the ablest people who are less than interested in playing bureaucratic games. Leaks conceivably open the United States to manipulation by a foreign power that understands these organizational dynamics. The persistent rumors (that were convincingly proved unfounded) that a senior staff member of the National Security Council, after a few drinks, let slip information that led to the capture of a C.I.A. spy in the Soviet Union is a case in point.

In a fragmented atmosphere of internecine organizational battles, this is just the kind of "rumor" that, if spread by a foreign-intelligence body, would be a classic example of "disinformation" designed to create havoc. In one stroke, it sows doubts about trust and makes it increasingly difficult to recruit other agents.

Unless there is a tempering of the widespread leaking of classified information, it will be exceedingly difficult to establish coherent control of the United States' national-security apparatus.

Only with a directed, coordinated defense organization can the many problems of the 1980's be solved.

Paul Bracken is a staff member of the Hudson Institute, a policy-research organization, in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y. Martin Shubik is professor of mathematical institutional economics at Yale University.